

RITUPARNO, RABINDRANATH AND 'THE SYSTEM'

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Tonight, 22nd Shravan, at 10.30 pm, Doordarshan's National channel would be showing Rituparno's unreleased documentary on Rabindranath Tagore: Jeevan Smriti, 'Selective Memories'. At long last! I hope it works out this time, because the matter has been so unduly delayed that one is never sure. His soul may finally get some rest, because I have a strange feeling that it was rather upset: he just could not understand why things in government always take so painfully long!

Frankly, this is the least we could have done for Ritu and I am almost certain that many people will have interesting views or excited comments after this first public viewing before the whole nation. As it is meant for national and international audiences, the film is in English, as was Satyajit Ray's Tagore centenary tribute.

It's a little amusing when I think about how I keep getting entangled with this bright spark, even after he left us two months ago, without even saying a proper 'goodbye'! I remember the sheer panic with which Rituparno rang up early on a February morning last year, the day after I left the Ministry of Culture to join Prasar Bharati. He almost demanded to know: how I could leave without completing his film. I assured him "I am always with you, I'll be Delhi for five years now, don't worry", etc, but it did not seem to cut much ice. Could I not stay back in Culture till the Closing Ceremony of Tagore's 150th Birth Anniversary Celebrations in May and have his documentary shown? I assured him that there would be no problems, and we would have it shown properly, "wherever I was". "Promise?" "Yes, I promise!" Who knew then that we would have to keep this promise this way, tonight?

I did get some phone calls from him over the next two months and was

really glad to learn that the film was completed in June, but he had missed the Closing Ceremony of the Tagore Anniversary. Little did he realise that his real problems would begin only after he submitted the final DVD, Digibeta tapes and the script to the NFDC, which was entrusted by the Ministry of Culture with the production responsibility. But let us go for a little ‘flashback’: to get the history and the context.

It was sometime early in 2010 when Prosenjit (Bumba) and Rituparno walked into my office in Shastri Bhavan, and started discussing some exciting possibilities. I had left Calcutta about four years earlier, but Calcutta did not seem to be leaving me. I would get visits and calls, on and off from all my friends, young and old, anytime. And I could not blame them as there was hardly any senior Bengali official left in Delhi, whose heart and soul belonged to Calcutta. The Ritu that I saw after almost three years had changed quite a lot. I could notice the difference in his walk and talk, because he made no qualms about what he considered his gender. He was in something that looked like a salwar kameez and sat down very coyly, with his legs crossed over, while Bumba made himself comfortable and admired the statues and the large Hemen Mazumdar on the wall in my office.

I asked him how Shob Charitro Kalponik had been received, and asked him for a DVD if possible. Then we moved on to Rabindranath, literally: we moved to a large photograph of Rabindranath and Mahatma Gandhi, in my room. They were seated side by side, in Shantiniketan, but Ritu looked intently only at Rabi Thakur for quite a long time, almost ignoring Gandhi and without a single word. I chipped in with my usual comment on the attire of the two great founders of modern India. While one of them wore a lot of clothes from neck to toe, which I thought must have been a little uncomfortable in this hot and humid atmosphere, the other wore so little. Yet both succeeded in projecting the message of their lives and their

missions, partly through their diametrically opposite sartorial tastes.

Bumba dropped out of Ritu's Tagore 'idea' although we remained in touch over some other matters, but Rituparno persisted. He was not clear what exactly he wanted to do with Rabi Babu and I told him to hurry up. For the first time in history, we had the Prime Minister of India as India's Culture Minister for one and a half years and, (believe me) the two projects about which he reminded me regularly were the celebrations of the 150th anniversaries of Tagore and the Vivekananda. On 20th May, 2010, he presided over the first meeting of the National Committee, which had several luminaries: from Sonia Gandhi and Pranab Mukherjee to Narendra Modi. There was a suggestion at PM's meeting that it is best not to try a new documentary on Tagore as Ray's iconic film was a landmark, but members ultimately left it to the National Implementation Committee to decide. For the next 2 years, Pranab Mukherjee, the then Finance Minister, led this Committee, with complete sincerity: that is why the 150th anniversary celebrations could be done on so large a scale.

Rituparno was yet to frame a proper proposal, but by the time he gave us one, dozens of other film proposals had started raining on our heads. I must tell you about one, which asked for a few crores to film every town and city that Tagore had visited overseas, from Japan and China to Europe and Argentina! We could not accept it, but I am sure that if we had, many people would have loved to join it, even as cameramen or clapper-boys. That reminds me: we could now try to make out an interesting list of how many people, Tagore scholars and overnight experts, visited how many countries of the world, over these two years, all thanks to Gurudev.

At the second meeting of National Implementation Committee on 14th July 2010, Mamata Banerjee attended as the Union Railway Minister and supported Rituparno's project and made several other suggestions and claims. The

Information & Broadcasting Minister, Ambika Soni, looked at the long list of film proposals and immediately suggested that it could be examined by a committee under Shyam Benegal and other eminent film experts. This committee was approved and was activated immediately by Tuk Tuk Kumar, the Joint Secretary. When Ritu enquired, I told him flatly that he would have to face the Benegal Committee and that he would have to go through, on his own merits. Through some serious exercises, Benegal and his committee recommended some select projects only and finally on 6th April 2011, the National Implementation Committee sanctioned at its third meeting a few proposals for films, chief among which was Rituparno Ghosh's documentary on Tagore entitled 'Home and the World'. Ritu changed this title twice and would finally give it the present name, but if I know government, then this file will be called 'Home and the World' for ever and ever.

Then, began Ritu's tryst with the 'system'. NFDC's procedures were as bureaucratic as most governmental organizations, and by May, he was so fed up that he had his first major brush. Tuk Tuk came to my room to show me his email 'fight' with the authorities, where he bitterly complained that he had been waiting patiently for months. He burst out: "we were waiting for the order. So it would be inappropriate to assume that all of us got it wrong completely. That makes us stupid morons or....." He could be blunt when he was tormented! I found that some underling in our ministry would not clarify and an equally stubborn fellow in NFDC would not accept. This was happening all the time, as most officers all over the world have a mental block about any new idea that is not covered in some old Rule book. Besides, the NFDC's top rung were in Cannes, as they are around this time invariably of the year.

The 'order' was ultimately issued and he started work in late July and wanted our letters of recommendation to shoot in Visva Bharati, as he went on

roving the ‘Bengal countryside’. He planned to visit London and some European spots and we wrote to our Indian mission in London, but Ritu would not let me go until I spoke to our High Commissioner. He dropped the idea of England and Oxford, though visas were recommended and he never really told us why. It went on like this for months: sometimes a little footage was required from Richard Attenborough’s ‘Gandhi’, sometimes from Ray’s ‘Ghare Baire’. Or, he would need to shoot on the Ichhamoti river and hence the BSF’s permission was required, and the Kolkata Port Trust was needed for something else.

I was amazed at our capacity. How ‘the system’ had managed to bring so many activities under ‘government-permission-required’ mode: oh God! The Joint Secretary or some other junior would handle most of these and I came to know most developments from Ritu himself, not from my officers who were fed up anyway, with so many proposals and a demonic boss hounding them. Ritu would regularly give me his long calls, usually late at night or early in the morning: more as a sounding board than as a ‘secretary’.

He once decided to change the title to ‘The King of the Dark Chamber’, but we had to tell him to stop using known titles. On 31st January in 2012, I got a desperate mail and a call from Ritu that despite our letter, Visva Bharati would not permit him to shoot as the senior authorised official was on leave till 12th February. “If no suitable university staff is instructed to cooperate, the entire Bolpur trip will turn out to be a wasted effort, in terms of money, team endeavour and timing”. This was resolved and the Registrar did help. Then in March, he chanced upon the grand lodge of the Viceroys in Shimla and became excited as it would serve his purpose. I was out of the Culture Ministry then, but he insisted that I take it up, please, with the Central Institute that occupies it, the Ministry of HRD that supervises it and the Archaeological Survey of India that maintains it. I spoke to all but again, some issue must have come up because his associate,

Sanjoy Nag, told me that even this was dropped. At that time, he was obsessed with his desire to capture Basanta Utsav in Shantiniketan, but he was short of funds.

I remember his plea to the Culture Ministry for releasing the balance money. March is a terrible month in government, because the financial year ends and all claimants are parked in our offices, for their money. The Joint Secretary helped but he made it clear that the new regime in the Ministry had moved on to other priorities. Some officers appeared to be breathing a sigh of relief that this ‘excessive obsession’ with Tagore and Vivekananda was finally getting over! All Tagore-related proposals that had come in late or had been dragged on, with typical sarkari queries, were told in May that the final bell has rung, and so no more of Tagore. Rituparno was too well known, so his film was not ignored: but the people responsible for its release just forgot about it for one whole year, as it slept quietly in some corner of the NFDC office in Bombay.

Between July 2012 and May of this year, Ritu spoke to me about his work and to remind me to help release his imprisoned film. I reminded the Ministry, informally of course, and tried other methods but things did not move. The last time Ritu spoke was in May, saying that he really wanted me to be there for the National Film Awards event in Delhi on the 3rd. It was his ‘abbaar’, but Delhi is Delhi and that particular day was just too bad: I reached home after 11 pm and missed the event. I had let Ritu down, but by this time he had proved that winning National Awards was only one of his regular habits. It was now almost an annual feature: he had won a dozen, maybe more. I had assumed that he would be here again soon because he was really bothered that his documentary was not yet released. Then Rituparno left so suddenly within a few days, with absolutely no warning.

That night, some of us swore to get his film out, at any cost: even our patience with ‘the system’ has its limits! Soon, Ravindra Singh joined as the new

Secretary: he is culturally inclined and an old friend. He agreed to help and, at long last the Ministry instructed NFDC to obtain the Censor Board's certificate. This hardly took any time, but Ritu could have easily been present at the public release, if only this had been done earlier. There are lots of questions he would have been asked, so let us get back from 'the system' to Ritu and Rabindranath. I had cautioned him several times that his documentary would definitely be compared to Satyajit Ray's, and his subject was 'Rabindranath' which was sensitive, but he was confident that his interpretation was a fresh one and that he had viewed Tagore from a completely different angle. After all, his Chitrangada had played around, quite cheekily or dangerously, with the original stories of Mahabharat and Gurudev.

He sent me the DVD, unofficially, and rang up again and again, till I saw it. That was Ritu, when he was totally involved: no rest, no sleep, no respite. I was first a little perplexed, and then amused, at Rituparno's deconstruction of the linear narrative that biopics usually follow. He did keep a chronological sequence, but it was interspersed with poetry readings, lyrics and un-orthodox interjections. He personalised his involvement with Tagore in a manner that few film-makers could ever dare to, and a Bengali would think several times before venturing. This is why he had finally called it 'Selective Memories', as it is completely different from a linear history. Some directors do punctuate the flat chronicle of documentaries by focussing their emphasis on what they feel the person really represents. Ray's rich documentary on Tagore, with the commentary in his own baritone voice, often swayed with a few touches of emotion, as the master narrated a life that was simply too large to capture. It remains a landmark: but he never brought his family's involvement with Tagore or the Brahmo dharma into the frames, except where essential: such was his capacity to detach and restrain. Rituparno, however, walks in and out of the frame, breaking down spatial and temporal realities that

restrain more logical minds. It is best to let the viewers' judge.

But then, we all have to see it together: the question is how? Rituparno had wanted a proper release in theatres and he even had given an additional 5.1 Dolby film print, so that it could be shown in non-digital form in movie halls. We can still expect a grand show at Nandan and it is expected that today, Delhi's Siri Fort would also screen it. Maybe, maybe not: no one has confirmed to me as yet. My promise to the bright comet who had blazed his way over the landscape of Indian films, so briefly but so bright, was to arrange to have it shown as well as I could. In my present post, the best I could do is to release his bottled spirit through television, so that lakhs could see it, rather than thousands.

We leave it to the viewer to form his own opinion about this extraordinary dialogue between Rituparno and Rabindranath. On the 22nd of Shravan, Gurudev left the world and 21 years ago Satyajit Ray followed suit. Ritu just disappeared, less than 10 weeks before. Do you think they have met in the other world, to carry on their unfinished discourse ?